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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Washington, D.C. 20520

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November 17, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR: Mr. Henry A. Kissinger
The White House

SUBJECT: Aerial Reconnaissance and U.S.
Policy Toward China

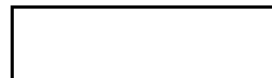
*Henry - govt to be
sure to talk to
the President before he
decides to go
ahead on this*

Our present strategy toward Peking is described in NSSM 14. (p. 9) as deterrence of any possible direct Chinese threat across its borders or to the U.S., combined with limited efforts to suggest to the Chinese the desirability of changing their policies in the direction of a more tolerant view of other states. As part of this policy, the NSSM points out, we have sought to reduce tension, promote reconciliation with the PRC, and encourage greater Chinese contact with the outside world and with the US by a variety of measures including "avoidance of provocative military actions."

The policy questions raised by aerial reconnaissance relate to the extent to which such activity is likely to be seen as provocative by Peking, whether U.S. reconnaissance activities significantly affect Peking's general policy posture toward the US, and the degree to which such activities conflict with our public and private posture of seeking "more normal relations" and the relaxation of tensions with the Chinese. A related question which you raised with me November 12 is whether we may intentionally wish to convey a more provocative attitude toward Peking, and whether such a policy may be more successful in bringing pressure on the Chinese to shift their policies than is our present policy or a policy of even more active efforts to reduce China's isolation and points of US-Chinese conflict.

We do not believe that the US could plausibly sustain a policy which had as a possible and accepted end result a major conflict with Communist China. The Soviets were able to follow this course because of their geographical relationship to China which enabled them to give substance to threat by massing large forces, and possibly by orchestrating troop clashes, along the common Sino-Soviet border, and by their freedom from domestic political constraints.

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It is far from clear that, even with the Soviet power position, the strategy which they have followed of combining a more threatening posture with attempts to obtain substantive negotiating concessions from the Chinese will be successful even though the Chinese have sat down to talk. If we wished to pursue a similar policy, we should use actions far weightier than aerial reconnaissance to signal our intent, and should probably discontinue public statements of readiness to improve relations with Peking and defer any further steps in that direction. This I would certainly not recommend.

We believe that aerial reconnaissance in itself is provocative, irritating, and while it does signal some hostile U.S. intent toward China, is essentially of a pinpricking character which antagonizes rather than threatens. It is seen as provocative by Peking for the same reason that our previous reconnaissance of the Soviets was seen as provocative by Moscow and on occasion seriously jeopardized US-Soviet negotiations. Similar Chinese or Soviet activity over the U.S. would be seen by us in the same light. The Chinese, perhaps even more than the Soviets, resent and are frustrated by efforts, whether successful or unsuccessful, to take advantage of their apparent weakness in order to violate their airspace and territorial waters.

We believe that in this respect Peking does not qualitatively distinguish between U.S. intrusions over its coast or along its southern frontiers or deep into its heartland. The Chinese obviously have some secrets they are more determined to protect than others and their on-site defensive preparations vary accordingly. Nevertheless, we are convinced that their fundamental protest is directed against the general concept of intrusions, not how or where these occur. Our intrusions have been consistently and prominently featured by the Chinese in our past conversations in Warsaw as illustrations of the alleged hypocrisy of US policy toward Peking. The recent October shoot-down of a US drone by the Chinese was the subject of a prolonged series of propaganda articles and broadcasts within China condemning the US. Although we obviously can prove no direct connection, our renewed drone program coincided almost exactly with a sharp increase in both the numbers and virulence of Chinese propaganda attacks on U.S. policy, and we suspect our activities may at least have contributed to this even if they did not precipitate it.

Ultimately, Peking will determine its policy toward the US, including whether to sit down again to talk with us in Warsaw or elsewhere, on the basis of its over-all evaluation of U.S. policy, not one specific indicator such as a renewal or cessation of aerial reconnaissance over the mainland.

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Neither a total cessation nor a major renewal of reconnaissance in itself will fundamentally affect Peking's general policies. Peking's policies were no different after March 1968, when aerial reconnaissance directly over the mainland was suspended, than prior to this date. We do continue to believe, however, that there are differences in Peking over how to deal with the US and that our profession of interest in moderating tensions coupled with our limited gestures thus far have kept open discussion on alternative tactics toward the US. In this context, the continuation of regular aerial reconnaissance activities significantly and negatively contributes to policy discussions in Peking on relations with the US and substantially neutralizes the effect of what we have been saying and doing in a more conciliatory direction. Furthermore, it raises serious problems when it is surfaced in terms of the US public reaction to the apparent conflict between our professed public goals and our actions. Senator Fulbright's remarks in the Senate November 10th are an example of this.

Granted all of the foregoing I do believe that there are and could be situations such as developments in the Chinese nuclear and missile fields where the intelligence requirements are so overriding as to offset the political costs. As you know I have supported a mission in this field involving an overflight. On the other hand it seems clear to me that, given our other sources of intelligence on the proposed targets, the lack of indication that the Chinese are contemplating any moves in the target area that would threaten our forces or those of our allies, the generally marginal importance of the intelligence being sought, and the performance record of the vehicles flown thus far, the case for further missions at this time is not sufficiently strong to override the political costs.

Thus I do not concur with the proposed missions.

U. Alexis Johnson

P.S. The Secretary would appreciate the opportunity of discussing this with the President.
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